

D&D Fiction

At the Wellspring

by James Wyatt



Thiera glanced up at the sun, high in the desert sky. The haze that surrounded the great monolith made the sun appear blue, a blazing azure beacon in a deeper cobalt sky. The sand at her feet was blue as well, and the months she had spent in the shadow of the monolith had driven the sand into every crevice of her clothes.

I'll never lose this blue, she thought.

She walked around the monolith for the thousandth time, dragging her fingertips over its impossibly smooth surface. As she walked, she muttered at it, urging it to reveal its secrets to her so that she could continue on the path to her destiny. She had already exhausted every incantation she knew and every spell her research had uncovered, to no avail. The smooth slab was as mysterious as when she had first discovered it.

She stopped and slammed her fist against the unyielding slab. "'Cobalt mystery' indeed!" she cried out, her voice startling a buzzard that had landed nearby so it took to the air and circled with its companions.

Again she repeated the words she had first heard from the lips of the blind oracle at Zhordan:

*Behold the Wellspring's hallowed gate
Through which all souls in birth and death
Must pass for good or ill. The fate
Of all who now draw breath,
Who once have lived, who yet will be,
Is bound in cobalt mystery.*

As always, the recitation of the words had no effect that she could discern, and she turned away from the monolith in a fury, staring out at the distant horizon as if searching for some inspiration.

Her magic had shown her the ceaseless passage through the gate described in the verse: souls entering the world to take flesh in birth, and souls freed from their incarnation departing for their eternal rewards. That much she understood: This Wellspring was the one point in the world through which souls could pass. Had her inclinations been different, she was sure she could amass great power here by finding a way to harvest the souls in their passage and use them for foul ends. She had already killed one necromancer who had come to the Wellspring with that purpose in mind -- killed him and watched his soul disappear into the mute blue stone.

But something more was here, Thiera could feel it. This was the reason she was still alive and healthy, even though her great-grandchildren were stooped and gray. That much the Zhordanian oracle had told her. This



monolith was tied to her destiny.

But what was she supposed to do?

Months spent in this forsaken desert had not revealed the answer to that question. Still, she'd keep trying to discover the answer. She sank to the ground, leaning her back against the monolith and gazing blindly out over the endless sands. The cobalt stone was cool to the touch, and seemed to sustain her -- it quenched her thirst and sated her hunger, removed the weariness from her bones.

But it did nothing for her heart.

The travelers had closed in before they registered on Thiera's senses -- a ragtag line of people on foot leading pack camels across the sand, right toward the monolith. Thiera jumped to her feet and watched them draw nearer, trying to judge whether she would have to kill them as well. None of them looked like a necromancer -- in fact, the tall warrior at the front of the line looked like he might be a paladin, which reassured Thiera slightly.

When the leader came within shouting distance, he held up his hand to halt his companions, some of whom looked as surprised to see Thiera as she had been to notice them a moment before. She tried not to look threatening, though she had prepared her mind to rain death upon them if the need arose.

The warrior called to her. He held his hands open and high, though she could see the greatsword slung on his back. "Are you the guardian of the Wellspring?"

The guardian? Thiera's mind spun. Until that moment, she had assumed that the monolith held some secret that she was supposed to uncover, that it would somehow reveal her destiny to her and then release her to pursue it. It had never crossed her mind that her presence here in this place was her destiny.

But it made sense. In fact, she had accepted the role of guardian without being conscious of it -- that was why she had killed the necromantic interloper without a second thought. And in his oblique way, the oracle had said as much, though of course she hadn't understood until now.

She had assumed the Wellspring was a stop along the way of a greater journey. She looked around, not sure that this was where she wanted to spend the rest of what had already been an unnaturally long life.

She saw the warrior shift uncomfortably and remembered that she had not answered him.

"I am," she replied. For better or worse, she added to herself. "What has brought you here?" She saw an elf in the party shift nervously, his hand almost settling on the hilt of his slender sword.

The leader looked back over his shoulder and spoke quietly to his companions. They intended to fight her, Thiera was certain. But why?

"We have come to open the Wellspring," the warrior called back to her. "I sense no evil in you, so I would not choose to do battle with you. But if you stand between us and our goal, we are prepared to use force to achieve

it."

Open the Wellspring? Thiera turned her back on the intruders and gazed again at the monolith behind her, her mind racing. What would that do? It was a gate through which souls were freely passing -- was it not already open?

"Keep your weapons sheathed," she called back over her shoulder, then she turned around to face them again. "Before any fighting begins, let me hear why you have come."

The elf clearly suspected a trap. Rapier in hand -- Thiera supposed he had drawn it quietly while her back was turned -- he was whispering with the group's leader. Thiera watched the leader shake his head firmly, then begin to walk toward her. The rest of his party followed.

A human woman in a loose shirt and tight pants followed close after the leader, either in complete agreement with his plan or too devoted to him to question it. A male dwarf in heavy armor came a few paces behind her, then a leather-clad human man with a longbow slung over his back, and finally the elf, hanging back uncertainly. They left their camels at a distance.

"I am Madhan, Knight of the Chalice," the leader said as he drew closer. Thiera had heard of that knightly order -- they devoted themselves to fighting demons, she believed, which strengthened her original impression of Madhan as a paladin.

"I am Thiera," she replied, some part of her wishing that she had a title to add. "Guardian of the Wellspring," she blurted as an afterthought, though she still wasn't sure what that meant. Madhan smiled, and Thiera liked him instantly -- the warmth in his smile was utterly without scorn. She returned his smile before it occurred to her that her role as guardian might demand a more fearsome demeanor.

"My companions are Barak, champion of Moradin --" the dwarf nodded a small bow, "Danav of the Mistwood --" the archer bowed deeply, "Riel dar Manis --" Madhan indicated the elf, who only frowned, "and my oathsworn companion, Phina." The woman smiled and raised her hand slightly, but her smile lacked the warmth of her husband's. Was she jealous? Thiera smiled -- this woman couldn't possibly guess that five generations of her offspring had walked the earth.

"You are welcome here," Thiera said, smiling again at Madhan. "It is long since I have had any company save the souls passing through." She watched all their eyes shift from her to the Wellspring behind her, as if they expected to see what her magic sight had revealed to her: the continuous traffic of souls through the gate. "Will you sit with me and tell me why you have come?" She extended her hands to offer them seats on the blue sand beside the monolith.

Without hesitation, Madhan and Phina came over to sit close to Thiera, and the others moved to sit beside their leader -- all except Riel, the elf, who paced slowly outside their little circle without ever drawing too near the monolith. Barak produced a bulging waterskin and passed it to Madhan, who drank before passing it on. Thiera declined a drink -- no food or water had passed her lips in months, and she saw no reason to change that now.

Madhan took a second drink from the skin, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, and began to speak. "I will get directly to the point. We believe that the world is in danger, facing a threat similar to the one that caused the establishment of the Wellspring. The Wellspring no longer serves its original purpose -- in fact, as long as it remains closed, the world has no defense against the demons that threaten it. We plan to open it once more, so

the magic of incarnum can serve as a weapon against the soul demons."

Thiera stared blankly at the knight. He clearly assumed that she knew far more than she did. As she opened her mouth to begin a stream of questions, though, she felt a stirring in the monolith behind her, and a series of visions sprang into her mind.

She saw the world at war. Angels and demons dueled, wrestled, and tore at each other in the skies, in the seas, on mountaintops, and in canyons. The visions overwhelmed her senses, and she watched them unfold for a long moment. Then the details began to penetrate her swirling mind.



An angel raising a sword of gleaming azure, the blade itself singing with the joy of a heavenly chorus as it bit deep into demon flesh. A spearhead of midnight blue, howling in madness and torment as it pierced an angel's wing. Armor, gleaming circlets, weapons of every shape and size, banners, cloaks -- all various shades of blue and all shaped, to Thiera's sight, from souls.

Thiera's mind rebelled. To shape a weapon from souls? That was horrible -- as evil as whatever designs her dead necromancer visitor had planned. Even as the thought formed in her mind, however, the vision shifted. She saw the souls that formed an angel's breastplate crying out in torment as a demonic blade raked through them. And then she witnessed a process that must have taken years, perhaps centuries, but that passed before her eyes in an instant: The angels changed, warped by their evil works, until they were indistinguishable from the demons they fought.

In that instant, she understood. The mystery of the Wellspring was opened to her. The Wellspring had been established to prevent the evil those angels and demons had wrought in ages long past: Its purpose was to prevent the souls from being used as tools and fodder in their warfare. As long as the Wellspring stood intact, souls could pass from this world to the next, but their energy could not be harnessed.

Her eyes flicked around at the blue that stained the sand, the cobalt sky, and the monolith at her back. The Wellspring was not perfect -- soul energy leaked around it, too plentiful to be contained. It seeped into the earth beneath her and filled the sky. In this one place, it was real enough to touch -- to shape, to mold.

Incarnum. The name formed in her mind and she spoke it, barely aloud. Souls given substance. But not souls -- just their residue, their imprint left in their passing. It was enough.

She focused her mind for a moment, heedless of the eyes fixed on her, and the blue sand began to stir. Tendrils of blue mist formed around her hand and extended from it, obeying her every mental command. A little more concentration, and the mist hardened into bright blue steel, a hefty warhammer in her hand. It thrummed with power and seemed to resonate with something deep in Thiera's own soul.

The elf, Riel, jumped back, his rapier springing back into his hand. "Madhan," he said in a low voice. "I told you . . ."

But the leader held up a hand and kept his seat beside Thiera. The others continued watching in amazement, though they shifted uneasily, ready to spring to their feet.

Thiera stood slowly, and Madhan joined her, followed by the rest of his companions. "If the Wellspring is opened," she said, "this power will spread. What I do here will be possible anywhere, and all people -- not just those of good intention -- will be able to harness the magic of incarnum. It will be used for evil. And some will repeat the evils of old: Not content to work with incarnum, they will shape souls to do their bidding once more." She stared at Madhan, who returned her gaze without blinking. "Terrible evil will be done with this."

"Soul-consuming evil will overwhelm the world without it," Madhan said.

As if in response to his words, a low sound like a chorus of distant moans and howls erupted behind them, on the other side of the monolith. They whirled toward it and watched as a gateway sprang open in the empty air. Through the magic portal stepped a demonic warrior, eight feet tall, with purplish-red skin and monstrous curved horns, clad in midnight-blue armor covered with hundreds of tormented faces. His greatsword was the source of the sound -- it too was adorned with faces, their mouths open wide, and their screams and groans produced the ghostly chorus.

The noise grew louder as the sword cut through the air and sliced Riel dar Manis cleanly in half.

"This portal shall not be opened," the demon said, its voice like three men speaking at once. "Guardian of the Wellspring" -- he pointed his blade at Thiera -- "do your duty!"

Madhan did not hesitate, but leapt at the demon, his own greatsword springing into his hands with a blinding flash of silver light. Barak and Phina sent spells hurtling at their new foe, while Danav strung three arrows at once and shot them toward the demon's throat.

Thiera felt as though she were floating outside of time, watching the battle begin in agonizing slowness. She understood so much now that had been hidden from her, as though the Wellspring had awaited this moment to reveal it to her. Why? Why had it ignored her entreaties for months, only to reveal all its mysteries now?

Because it wants to be opened, she thought. This race of demons wanted it to stay closed because they had somehow found a way around it. This fiend's sword and armor were clearly formed of souls in torment. So the Wellspring had failed and served no purpose now except preventing earth's defenders from harnessing the magic of incarnum for themselves.

If the demon had hoped to secure her aid by invoking her duty, he would shortly become sorely disappointed, she thought. Thiera drew more incarnum around her, forming an angelic body surrounding her own that lifted her into the air on cerulean wings. With the force of a divine avenger, she swooped down on the demonic warrior, swinging her incarnate warhammer mightily.

Power surged through Thiera's veins with her pounding pulse. This is why I am alive, she sang to herself, this is why I am here.

In a matter of seconds, the demon lay dead at her feet, and Madhan knelt beside her. Thiera was vaguely aware of Barak tending to a sorely wounded Danav, and of Phina watching her with a look of something like awe on her face. But she ignored them and turned one last time to face the Wellspring.

The mighty hammer in her hands hummed in exultation, echoing the triumph that filled her own heart.

"I have always been good," she said aloud, "but now I am more -- I am good made flesh, good incarnate. I have always fought for what is good, but now I will fight with weapons made from the desires and longings of all who share my convictions." She hefted the warhammer in her hands, then drew it back over her shoulder. "Let goodness prevail!" she cried, and swung the warhammer hard, crashing it into the Wellspring.

A great crack spread like thunder across the face of the monolith, and a bolt of lightning shot across the clear blue sky. Thiera drew back and swung again, then again -- two more peals of thunder, two more flashes of lightning, and then the Wellspring shattered.

First it fell inward, like a building caving in on itself, but quietly -- at least it seemed so after the deafening crashes of the blows Thiera had dealt it.

But then a mighty roar of wind caused an explosion of sand and dust and swirling blue mist to erupt in all directions. Madhan threw his arms over his head, Phina screamed, and Barak tried to shield Danav's body, but Thiera stood unflinching in its full force.

It passed in an instant, and silence fell over the desert. The force of the blast had stripped the angelic avatar from around her and made the warhammer dissolve in her hands, but Thiera was unharmed. She stood on the edge of a crater, the sprinklings of blue in the sand all that remained of the great monolith that had stood on that spot for thousands upon thousands of years.

It's done, Thiera thought. The Wellspring is open, and the world will never be the same.

She looked at her hands. Wisps of blue mist clung to them, and as she looked, they moved again in response to her thoughts, hinting at the infinite possibilities that now lay at her command.

She spoke aloud, a smile beginning to show below her gleaming blue eyes as she thought of her destined path. "And neither will I."

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